

Digital Inclusion Policies

SA State Election 2018



SACOSS

*South Australian Council
of Social Service*



Digital Inclusion Policies

Introduction

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII), digital inclusion is based on the premise that:

All Australians should be able to make full use of digital technologies – to manage their health and wellbeing, access education and services, organise their finances, and connect with friends and family, and with the world beyond. (Thomas et al, 2017, p 7).

As the ADII notes, this is about more than simply owning a computer or smartphone. It is about social and economic participation. It is about using online and digital technologies to “improve skills, enhance quality of life, educate, and promote wellbeing across the whole society” (Thomas et al, 2016, p7).

Yet it is clear that not everyone is able to “make full use of digital technologies” – there is a digital divide which threatens to (further) exclude those not digitally connected. As more people, government and business services and more cultural interactions go online, this divide gets deeper. Digital inclusion is therefore part of a broader social inclusion agenda, but is particularly important because exclusion from digital technologies both reflects and compounds other areas of disadvantage.

Overall, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index, which maps the dimensions of the digital divide in Australia, concluded that digital inclusion tends to increase as income, education and employment levels rise (Thomas et al, 2017). The ADII measures household and personal use of digital technologies and scores are reported in relation to access, ability and affordability. *Alarming in the ADII South Australia rates significantly below the national average and is the second worst performing state or territory in Australia (only ahead of Tasmania).*

SACOSS’ 2017-18 Budget Submission argued that a major effort to improve digital inclusion in South Australia is needed – both as a social inclusion and an economic imperative. While the Budget itself did not adopt the proposals SACOSS put forward, there have been some good initiatives since then. The Utilities Literacy Program, which for years has been providing support for community workers and communities in relation to understanding energy costs, was expanded to include telecommunications. This is a welcome step recognising the importance of telecommunications, both as an essential service and as a major impact on the budget of low income South Australians.

Further, in July the government announced a plan to provide free public wi-fi on public transport. While this was announced more as a public transport promotion than a digital

inclusion exercise, the provision of free public wi-fi is in fact one the key measures the state government can take to address telecommunications access and affordability.

However, much more needs to be done and in this election SACOSS is calling on all parties to develop explicit policies aimed at narrowing the digital divide in South Australia. The following are the digital inclusion policies which SACOSS believes any future state government should adopt to begin to overcome digital disadvantage and narrow the digital divide.

Policy Summary

SACOSS is calling on all parties in this election to commit to:

- A comprehensive approach to digital inclusion with:
 - All parties having a set of election policies aimed at addressing digital disadvantage; and
 - A commitment to develop and implement a state-wide digital inclusion plan
- Specific initiatives to increase the provision of free public wi-fi in areas of digital disadvantage
- Making all sa.gov.au websites free (unmetered data) to users
- Funding for increased SA regional data in the Australian Digital Inclusion Index
- Funding for an audit of digital technology usage and literacy and to build digital capacity in the community services sector in SA
- Providing online tertiary education programs for prisoners to facilitate rehabilitation, digital inclusion and post-release life chances
- Providing an “offline service guarantee” that all government policies and services will remain easily accessible with no disadvantage to those who are not digitally connected.

Policies

A comprehensive approach to digital inclusion

SACOSS' 2017-18 State Budget Submission (SACOSS, 2017) set out the background of state government efforts to address our digital future, including the 2009 "Thinker in Residence" program (Bell, 2009) and the *Information Economy Agenda 2009-14*, (Govt of SA, 2009) but these initiatives are now dated and it is concerning that despite the importance of digital inclusion and our state's relatively poor performance (detailed in the ADII), South Australia has no strategy to improve digital inclusion.

SACOSS notes that the government has contracted PWC to develop a state digital economy strategy, but it is a truncated process and it is not clear whether or to what extent it will include a digital inclusion strategy to ensure that everyone can share in the digital economy.

SACOSS' Budget Submission proposed that the South Australian government establish and fund a high level stakeholder taskforce to develop and oversee a whole of government digital inclusion strategy. Our submission provided a rationale and description of the potential role and make-up of the taskforce, and also proposed a digital inclusion summit – all aimed at developing a strategic approach to overcoming digital disadvantage.

For this election, the mechanism (a task-force, a summit, or some other process) is less important than that all parties address the issue of digital inclusion as a matter of urgency. At a minimum, **SACOSS calls on all parties to develop and bring to the election a comprehensive set of policies aimed at addressing digital disadvantage**, but ultimately to ensure that these policies are integrated into government more broadly and have a longer life-cycle, **we seek a commitment that a future government will develop (by whatever consultative mechanism) and implement a state-wide digital inclusion plan.**

Increased provision of free public wi-fi in areas of digital disadvantage

The state government has recently announced a move to put free public wi-fi on public transport, and the Adelaide CBD also boasts free public wi-fi. This access to free public wi-fi should be expanded to other public places and could be particularly targeted to disadvantaged areas where the users would benefit most from such a free service.

Expanding the availability of free public wi-fi is particularly important to those on lowest incomes. SACOSS' *Connectivity Costs* report noted the struggles of those on low incomes to afford data and stay within the data limits on the telecommunications plan that were available for those on low budgets (Ogle & Mussolino, 2016). It is also the case that for one in five Australians, their only internet connection is via a mobile phone. Those on low incomes, not employed or with lower education levels are more likely to be mobile only users, as are Aboriginal Australians (Thomas et al, 2017). This is important because mobile data is the most expensive data on the market. SACOSS has calculated that those using mobile data can pay a poverty premium of 328% for a GB of data by comparison with those on home plans (SACOSS, 2017b), but many who are homeless, have insecure housing or just can't afford home-based computing devices may not have other connection options.

Provision of free public wi-fi would allow those on low incomes to retain some level of internet connection even where they did not have credit on a mobile phone. It would also help others stretch their data allowances across the month and their budget, and encourage/enable those on low incomes to have a greater digital presence and potentially more easily access services online.

Further, the provision of free public wi-fi in parks, malls, playgrounds and public spaces may also have community development benefits as it would also encourage people to utilise those spaces. This could help build vibrancy in those spaces and overcome the isolation that poverty, disadvantage and even home-based online activity may bring.

SACOSS therefore calls on all parties to commit to increasing the provision of free public wi-fi in disadvantaged areas. This could be done directly by government provision of services, or through grants or assistance to local councils, retail precincts, sporting clubs and community organisations to host free public wi-fi. Either way, provision for ongoing maintenance of the wi-fi connection would be crucial.

SACOSS is seeking more than a notional commitment to the idea of free public wi-fi. What is required is that parties detail either particular sites where the wi-fi is to be offered, or promise a particular sum of money for the provision of public wi-fi through a grant or other program, or a combination of both.

This policy proposal is also included in the SACOSS Cost of Living Policy

Unmetered access to government websites

Governments, both state and federal, reap the benefits of the cost savings in providing information and services online, and the South Australian government currently has a “Digital by Default” policy (Weatherill, 2014). However, while moving information and services online has many benefits it also often transfers the cost of access onto the clients or citizens who have to pay the data (and printing) costs of downloaded or uploaded information. By definition, government websites provide vital access to government services and also provide information and feedback mechanisms for people to be active as citizens, so those sites and that information should be free to browse and download.

Those struggling with telecommunications affordability and juggling small data allowances (Ogle & Musolino, 2016) should not miss out on state government services or concessions (or any local or federal government service or payment) because they can’t afford to freely browse the government website to find the right information and access points (or because their data runs out mid-download!). Similarly, if we would not accept a property qualification on voting in state elections, we should not accept an income/affordability barrier to participation in digital democracy where government websites (like YourSay) facilitate input into policy.

Accordingly, **SACOSS is calling for all sa.gov.au websites to be free to users.** In proposing this SACOSS notes that various telecommunications providers have agreements with entertainment providers like Netflix, Stan, Foxtel Play etc for non-metered content (presumably with the retailers wearing the cost in the hope of market share). If similar

arrangements were not possible for the state government, then the government should look to pay the telecommunication providers for the browsing, uploads and downloads to and from its websites. Even though this would involve cost to government, by encouraging online dealing with government, the state government would save itself staff time and money and allow better access to government for citizens. Further, there is an overall efficiency because the price per unit of data paid by the government should be far less than the top rates paid by many on low incomes who pay poverty-premiums on telecommunications plans (on this poverty premium see SACOSS, 2017b).

This policy proposal is also included in the SACOSS Cost of Living Policy

Funding for increased SA regional data in Australian Digital Inclusion Index

There are marked differences in digital inclusion within South Australia, and the divide between Adelaide and regional areas is important. Genevieve Bell, who travelled extensively in regional SA for her “Thinkers in Residence” report in 2009, found great differences between communities across the state (and within communities) in relation to their use of technology (Bell, 2009). The ADII data quantifies some of this difference. It shows that digital inclusion scores in country areas was 6% lower than the Adelaide score in 2017.

Area	ADII Score
Adelaide	53.9
SA Country	51.2
• Yorke & Murray	50.3
• South East	50.7
• Eyre	53.2

This Adelaide-country SA gap was in fact the lowest capital-country gap of all states and territories, and has changed significantly in the last few years. Rural SA’s score improved consistently from 42.9 in 2015 to 51.2 in 2017, while Eyre’s¹ score jumped by 7.7 points last year from 45.6 (one of the lowest areas in the nation) to above the national average for rural areas this year.

The ADII puts the closing of the Adelaide-country gap down to substantial gains in access and digital ability in regional South Australia (with affordability still the largest city-country gap). While there has undoubtedly been real gains in the last few years with SkyMuster and NBN increasingly coming online in country areas, there is also a question over the data with the sample spread over such a large and diverse area. The demographic and economic base, and the digital experience in Port Lincoln or Roxby Downs may be very different to Wudinna or properties north of Oodnadatta, yet all are included in the Eyre While undoubtedly reflecting broad trends, the data does not capture the nuances needed to target effective digital inclusion policies.

¹ In the ADII Eyre includes not only the Eyre Peninsula, but the entire north of the state (from around Port Pirie). As the data base did not include remote communities there would be limited data from much of this area.

This is not to denigrate the ADII. It remains the best tool currently available for measuring digital inclusion, but if we are to have evidence based policy then we need to be sure that the data is available, reliable and nuanced. SACOSS therefore proposes that a future South Australian **government fund an expansion of the ADII dataset for South Australia (and in particular, country SA).**

The data in the ADII is from Roy Morgan Research and a larger sample size is needed in regional areas. Such an expanded data set would not only increase the reliability of data, but also allow for finer integration of the data at a lower level – for instance, looking at different demographic groups within regions.

While the extra data gained from such an expansion of the sample would not increase anyone's digital inclusion of itself, it would be valuable for measuring digital inclusion, identifying and targeting programs, and evaluating results on a macro level. In that sense, it would provide good value for a relatively modest expenditure – although SACOSS would obviously also welcome any other data sources which could underpin better planning.

Assisting community service sector digital readiness

The community services sector is an important part of the South Australian economy. Using data from the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission (ACNC, 2016) SACOSS calculates that the SA registered community services organisations employed more than 30,000 South Australians in 2015.

On a conservative estimate the sector had a turnover in excess of \$3.1billion, representing some 3.1% of Gross State Product – and that does not include the contribution of community service organisations registered in other states but operating in South Australia.

Even more important than the size and economic impact of its own operations, the non-government community service sector has a vital role in supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our state. For many, the community service sector is a first point of contact and a key provider of services, but those providing the services are often volunteers (who may have older age profiles than the rest of the population) or are low paid workers, professionally trained in human services rather than in technology. Further, small charities often have little money for infrastructure and may be accessing only limited or dated digital technology. The sector as a whole faces significant digital challenges with minimal investment in information technology (Infoxchange, 2016).

These are all indicators that the community services workforce itself may not be the most digitally-included group. Infoxchange (2016) has surveyed NFP organisations nationally on their use of IT and digital communications, but there is no reliable data on the workforce's level of digital competence. However, if vulnerable and disadvantaged people are to be digitally included it is vital that those providing services that are aimed at overcoming that exclusion are themselves digitally savvy and resourced to assist with digital inclusion.

SACOSS is therefore proposing that the state government fund community sector development to support the sector being digitally engaged and resourced, or at least given

the modest size of the funding envisaged, to identify the current state of the sector and the opportunities that exist.

Specifically, the government should fund SACOSS, as the sector's peak body, for a three-year project to:

- Assess the use of digital technology and level of digital literacy in our sector by utilising the government's self-assessment tool and aggregating and analysing the data from the sector;
- Scope opportunities for increased/better use of digital technology in community services; and
- Build digital capacity in our sector.

SACOSS is well-placed to conduct this project. As the peak body in our sector we represent the non-government organisations providing front-line services, and we have a past record of similar "service-need scoping" exercises which led to the funding of the consumer credit legal service (SACOSS, 2013).

SACOSS also has the knowledge and policy background developed through our cost of living work, the survey and focus group research with low income South Australians on telecommunications affordability (Ogle & Musolino, 2016), and our ongoing engagement with the Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance.

The funding required would be in the region of \$150,000 per year for the next three years.

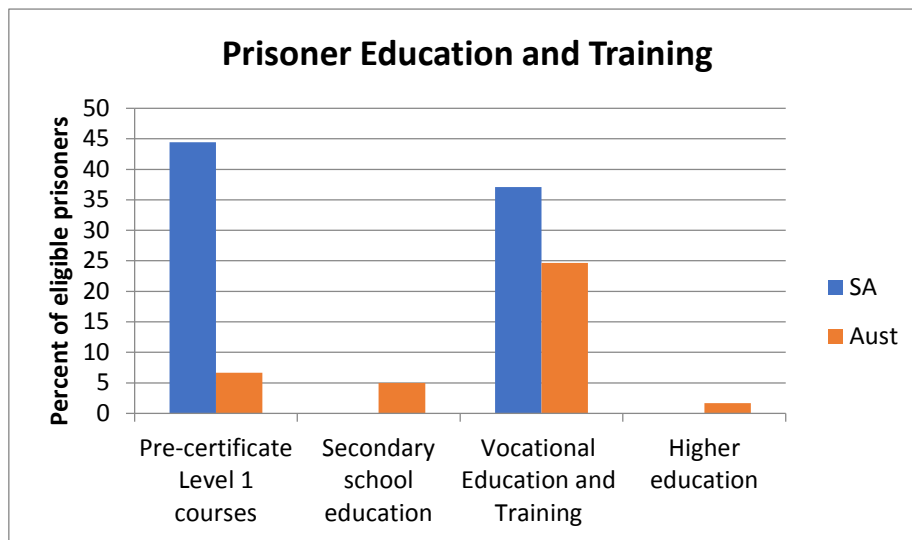
This policy proposal is also included in the SACOSS Community Sector Support Policy

Online tertiary education programs for prisoners

Part of the point of imprisoning people is to remove them from society, and this obviously also excludes them from digital communication. In a world where so much learning is online this means that prisoners are often denied educational opportunities, and without access to digital learning they are likely to be less digitally competent (included) and less employable when they are released.

The latest Productivity Commission data (2017) on government services shows that in 2015-16 some 67.4% of the eligible prisoner population in South Australia was engaged in some sort of education or training course – the second highest participation level in the country, and as the graph below shows, well above the national average.

However, the education participation of prisoners is not evenly spread across all education. Two-thirds of prisoner participants were in pre-certificate Level 1 courses – often basic numeracy, literacy or school equivalent bridging courses, while there was little or no access to tertiary education in South Australian prisons. This tertiary education result was below the national average, and well below Queensland and the ACT where 6.2% and 4.3% respectively of inmates are engaged in tertiary education.



The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has recognised this as a problem and has developed a program to provide computer-based education to prison in-mates in an enclosed system. This is not open access to the internet, but rather the learning software is installed on prison computers and updated by prison staff enabling prisoners to take pre-tertiary and undergraduate courses at USQ. This provides both access to tertiary education and familiarity with the use of notebook computers and digital style learning.

The program operates in most other states with strong retention rates (in some cases above the general USQ retention rates), but has been slow to be picked up in South Australia. A small pilot is currently being developed, but the status of the program is uncertain and will require extra effort to keep going because the initial grant funding which established the USQ program will cease in mid-2018. SACOSS is seeking commitment that:

- The pilot project is fast-tracked and properly resourced; and
- If the pilot is successful, resources will be made available for the adoption and expansion of the program on an ongoing basis as a core part of prisoner rehabilitation and post-prison transition planning.

This policy proposal is also included in the SACOSS Health, Housing and Justice Policy

Offline Service Guarantee

While SACOSS believes that everyone should have access to the opportunities offered by digital technologies, taking steps to increase digital inclusion is not enough. Alongside the measures above to increase digital inclusion, we also need to limit the cost of being on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The latest census data shows that 17% of South Australian households do not access the internet at home – and this figure exaggerates connectedness as it is based on anyone in the household accessing the internet (including via mobile phones) (ABS, 2017). And as noted above, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index rates South Australia as the second lowest jurisdiction for digital inclusion (Thomas et al, 2017). Even if we were wildly successful in a statewide digital inclusion agenda, it will still be the case that some proportion of our community will remain digitally excluded. This could be for a range of reasons including

choice, safety, lack of ability, or the outcome of other social disadvantage. It is important that these people are not further excluded by government moves to put access to services and information online.

SACOSS is therefore calling for any party in government to commit to an off-line service guarantee, that is, a commitment that all government policies and services will remain easily accessible and with no disadvantage to those without or who choose not to have a digital connection. The government's current *Digital by Default Declaration* (Weatherill, 2014) recognises that not all members of the community can access digital services, but only requires that "consideration" be given to their particular needs. This is considerably short of a guarantee of service provision.

The Australian Government's Digital Service Standard (Australian Govt, 2016) (which is being adopted by the state government) gets closer to a guarantee in that departments would need to show "non-digital access and support for people unable to use, or struggling with, the digital service". However, amid a policy directed at moving people to online interactions with government, it is not clear that this "access" would be of the same standard or without disadvantage to the non-digital citizen. In any case, if it is the intention to provide such non-digital access, then state governments – both current and future – should have no difficulty in announcing an off-line service guarantee.

In practice an off-line service guarantee would mean that for every government online engagement with citizens, there needs to be a parallel engagement stream available for those not online. This parallel stream could include shop-front access, phone lines and postage and should apply to government information/advertising programs, application for services and payment options.

The guarantee would need to be enshrined as a policy binding on all government departments, with some form of appeal/complaint process so that departments can be held to account if they are not offering these non-digital channels.

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